

MAINE PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT NETWORK SYSTEM



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*****ADVISORY – Important Information*****

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TO: AC Rural Healthcare; Border Medical Officers; FQHC; Home Health; Hospitals; ICP; LTCF; Media; Tribal Health Directors; Public Health Required; Public Health Nursing

FROM: Dora Anne Mills, M.D., M.P.H., Public Health Director

SUBJECT: Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (Red Tide) Illnesses – Washington County

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Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (Red Tide) Illnesses – Washington County

Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC)
(Formerly Bureau of Health)

Over the weekend of July 5, 2008 three people from Washington County were hospitalized with symptoms of paralytic shellfish poisoning, also known as red tide poisoning. This occurred several hours after they shared a meal of mussels. Samples of the mussels were highly contaminated with the toxin that causes paralytic shellfish poisoning. All three people were discharged the day after admission, and are expected to fully recover.

Information from the patients indicates that the source of mussels was a rope dangling in the ocean off a pier, and not a mussel bed. The area has been closed for about three weeks to shellfish harvesting because of red tide by the Department of Marine Resources' Toxin Monitoring Program. The mussels were taken by the people for personal use, and none are professional fishermen.

Paralytic shellfish poisoning is a marine biotoxin that is associated with certain types of algae blooms in coastal waters. Bivalve shellfish such as clams, mussels, oysters, and quahogs filter water and eat the toxic algae from the water. High concentrations of the toxin in these types of shellfish can then cause serious illness or even death if eaten by humans.

Although it had been about 30 years since the last report of Mainers with red tide poisoning, the state has seen two incidents in the past year, involving a total of seven people. Both incidents involved people from Washington County consuming mussels harvested for personal use and from mussels growing off from a rope or barrel floating in the ocean in areas closed for shellfish harvesting because of red tide.

These two incidents point out important steps people can take to thoroughly and safely enjoy Maine shellfish:

1. **Purchase shellfish from a certified shellfish dealer.** Their operations undergo rigorous public health screening and auditing.
2. **If harvesting for personal use, make sure the shellfish beds are not closed for red tide.** Check the Department of Marine Resources' website for the latest information on closed areas: (http://www.maine.gov/dmr/rm/public_health/closures/pspclosures.htm)
3. **Do not consume clams or mussels floating in ocean waters.** They are likely to have filtered much more algae-containing water than those from flats or beds, and therefore will usually have much higher concentrations of toxin.

Clinical Effects

Mild: paresthesias of tongue, lips and throat which may spread to face, neck, arms, fingers, and toes; headache; nausea; and possible gastrointestinal effects

Moderate: weakness of limbs; ataxia; incoherent speech; difficulty breathing; floating sensation and giddiness; dizziness; rash; fever; tachycardia and hypertension; dyspnea

Severe: choking sensation; severe respiratory difficulty or failure, usually within 12 hours

Onset: 30 minutes to 10 hours (usually within 2 hours)

Duration: hours to days; muscle weakness may last weeks

Treatment: if patients present soon after ingestion, consider lavage and activated charcoal; symptomatic/supportive; possible IV fluids and sodium bicarbonate

Shellfish that may be unsafe: Clams (soft shell, hard shell, surf, or hen); Mussels; Oysters (both American and European); Quahogs; Snails; and Whelks

Fish that are usually safe (please call the Poison Center to check, this list is not all-inclusive): Crab (meat, not whole crabs); Lobster (but avoid the tomalley); Scallop meats; Shrimp; and Finfish

Recommendations:

1. Medical providers should **be familiar with signs and symptoms** of paralytic shellfish poisoning and should maintain a high index of suspicion for persons who have consumed mollusks during the 10 hours preceding the onset of illness.
2. **Call the Northern New England Poison Center (NNEPC) at 1-800-222-1222** for clinical consultation
3. Suspect cases should be **reported immediately to the Maine CDC/DHHS at 1-800-821-5821** (can be reported after hours or anytime through the NNEPC as well)

FMI:

Maine Department of Marine Resources Red Tide Closures:

http://www.maine.gov/dmr/rm/public_health/closures/pspclosures.htm

Maine CDC/DHHS Red Tide Information:

http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/boh/maine_cdc_red_tide_information.htm

Northern New England Poison Center (NNEPC) Red Tide Information:

http://www.mmc.org/mmc_body.cfm?id=2166